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How to Thrive During Your Field Experiences

by Connie Schaffer and Kelly Welsh

You've spent years in the classroom as a student, but it's different when you're the teacher. These seven tips will help you maximize your field experiences.

How prepared are you for the process of becoming a teacher? You have likely developed good study habits that got you to college. These are a great foundation to help you do well in a teacher preparation program. But how prepared are you for an equally important component of educator preparation programs — field experiences? Field experiences, also referred to as practicums or clinical experiences, are part of every accredited teacher preparation program. These pre-student teaching experiences place you in a preK-12 classroom where you have the opportunity not just to observe, but also to learn about teaching by interacting with teachers and students.

Up until this point, you have experienced teaching and learning through the lens of a student. From this viewpoint, good teachers make teaching look easy. Your field experiences will provide an opportunity for you to experience teaching and learning from the perspective of a teacher. Seeing and experiencing teaching from this angle will help you confirm that you have chosen a major that is right for you.

Not only do field experiences build confidence regarding your choice of careers, they also provide a great opportunity to increase your confidence as you develop your teaching skills. There is nothing like real world opportunities to practice and apply all that you have learned about in your college classes. Concepts like lesson planning, teaching strategies, assessment, and classroom management come alive in preK-12 classrooms and give life to the pages from your textbooks.

The following tips will help you maximize — and thrive — in your field experiences requirements and take full advantage of these opportunities.

Professionalism is a must. The teachers and students in your field experiences will notice what you wear. Wear clothing that sets you apart from your students and helps to establish you as a professional. **Consider your entire look, head to toe.** This means you should consider your hairstyle, jewelry choices, body art, clothing, and shoes. The teacher and students will also notice your attendance and punctuality. Absences and late arrivals could be interpreted as a lack of interest or motivation. They will be counting on you to deliver lessons or work with small groups of students, so regular attendance and promptness are crucial.

Get off your seat and on your feet. When you are in your preK-12 classroom, be active. Push yourself beyond sitting through hours of observations. **You will learn more through active participation.** Be proactive and seek out what you can do to help your teacher and your students. If the teacher is leading a lesson, walk around the classroom and monitor student engagement. If the students are working at their desks, ask them if they have questions or invite them to explain to you what they are doing. Take the initiative and offer to teach a small portion of a lesson or even an entire lesson you have carefully planned with your teacher.

Students: The reason you are here. Getting to know your students is an important component of effective teaching. **Learn students' names as quickly as possible, and use them to call on students.** Find out something about the interests and backgrounds of the students, and use this to build a relationship

with them. A simple way to learn names and build relationships is to greet each student as they enter the classroom, and ask them a question about their day or one of their interests.

There's more to teaching than meets the eye. Although the majority of a teacher's day is spent with students, the teacher is responsible for many other duties. Most teachers have a supervision of some sort. This can be anything from playground duty in elementary grades to supervising a study hall in secondary grades. Teachers also have planning time each day that is filled with making copies, going to their mailbox, contacting parents, checking email — maybe even some planning. In addition, there are meetings with other teachers who teach the same courses or grade level. Take advantage of this time to learn more about the profession by actively participating in whatever your mentor teacher is doing.

Ask why. Coming into an established classroom can sometimes cause confusion for the college student, especially when what the classroom teacher is doing does not seem to match what you are learning in your education courses. This is when you need to ask, "Why?" Ask the teacher about the policies and procedures regarding absent and tardy students. Ask about cellphone usage in class and other technology use. Ask about how the teacher handles inattentive students. If something happens in the classroom that you don't understand, ask the teacher. You can say, "I noticed that when Sally Student did _____, you did _____. Could you explain to me why you handled it that way?" By asking a question for clarification and understanding, you remove any judgment from the situation.

Every day is a job interview. Every time you walk into a school building, consider yourself on a job interview. Every person you interact with, from the secretary in the front office to the special education paraprofessional in the classroom, is looking to see how you perform as a teacher. You want to always make a good impression. The teachers you work with also become a part of your professional network, and you never know when you may see them again. **After your field experience, send your teacher a written thank-you note.** It's a small token that sends a big message: You are a professional educator.

Make time to reflect. Great teachers critically examine their teaching practices on a regular basis to expand their knowledge, increase their skills, and integrate new ideas into their instruction. Before each day at your field experience, you should write in a journal about your expectations and your concerns. Afterwards, reflect on what was successful and what did not go so well and why. Videotape yourself, with permission, in the classroom so you can see how you present yourself as a teacher and interact with students. **Solicit feedback from other teachers so you can improve each time you are with students.** It's uncomfortable at first, especially watching yourself on video, but with time, you will come to appreciate the opportunities to improve.

It's up to you to make field experiences more than a survival checklist. Field experiences are an opportunity for you to improve your teaching skills and grow as a professional educator. As you move from being a student to being a teacher, your field experiences will help you thrive.

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